

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the Finance and Management Overview & Scrutiny Committee
held in Committee Room 1, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxon
at 2.00 pm on Wednesday 31 May 2017

PRESENT

Councillors: P Emery (Chairman), A D Harvey (Vice-Chairman), D A Cotterill,
C Cottrell-Dormer, P J G Dorward, S J Good, H J Howard, E H James, K J Mullins,
A H K Postan and G Saul

4. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meetings held on 5 and 26 April 2017 be approved as correct records and signed by the Chairman.

5. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

Apologies for absence were received from Mr A J Adams and Mr G H L Wall

6. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest from Members or Officers in matters to be considered at the meeting.

7. PARTICIPATION OF THE PUBLIC

There were no submissions from members of the public in accordance with the Council's Rules of Procedure.

8. MAIN POINTS FROM THE LAST MEETING AND FOLLOW UP ACTION

The Committee received and noted the report of the Chairman, which gave details of the main points arising from its meeting held on 5 April 2018.

9. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2017/2017

The Committee received the report of the Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service providing an update on the work programme for the Committee for 2017/2018.

9.1 Rural Broadband Project

It was noted that an update report would be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee. The Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service advised that the Council had recently secured BDUK approval for the tender documentation and that expressions of interest had been sought. It was anticipated that a number of expressions of interest would be forthcoming and tenders would go out in June or July and close in August. By September, once tenders received had been evaluated, the Council would be in a position to assess what could be achieved within current financial provision.

Mr Cotterill noted that Gigaclear had secured a number of contracts elsewhere in the country and might seek to bid for this project.

9.2 2020 Vision Project

It was noted that a briefing meeting was to be held for all Members at the conclusion of the Cabinet meeting on 14 June.

9.3 Re-organisation of Local Government

The Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service advised that, as a result of the impending General Election, there had been little progress or publicity on this issue. The County Council had submitted its proposal for a unitary authority and this would be considered by the new Secretary of State following the election. Although the County Council maintained that all the major political parties supported local government re-organisation this was not an authoritative view and in any event the position any future Government might take was unclear.

Mr Emery suggested that, as the County Council's proposals were not clear cut, it was likely that a decision would be delayed for some time. The Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service indicated that there had been no possibility of a decision being reached prior to the election given experience elsewhere.

9.4 Investment Property Review

It was noted that the annual investment property review would be considered at the next meeting. Mr Postan questioned whether the Council's interests in shared ownership properties ought to be included in the review and the Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service agreed to consider the request.

RESOLVED: That the Committee's Work Programme for 2017/2018 be approved.

10. CABINET WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received and considered the report of the Chief Executive, which gave Members the opportunity to comment on the Cabinet Work Programme published on 14 May 2017.

Following discussion at the last Council meeting, Mr Emery suggested that the Committee should give greater consideration to the Cabinet Work Programme and invited Members to draw attention to any matters that warranted the attention of the Committee. In order to assist Members in this respect it was **AGREED** that the full Cabinet Work Programme be put before the Committee in future.

RESOLVED: That the content of the Cabinet Work Programme published on 14 May 2017 be noted.

11. ELECTRIC VEHICLE CHARGING POINTS

The Committee received and considered the report of the Group Manager, GO Shared Services which provided Members with an update on the work of the Electric Vehicle Charging Point Working Party.

Mr Emery expressed his thanks to the members of the Working Party and to the Group Manager, GO Shared Services for the work they had achieved in such a short space of time. The approach suggested alleviated concerns over potential criticism of the use of public funds for a project that would initially only benefit a relatively small number of individuals.

(Mr E H James joined the meeting at this juncture)

Mr Postan indicated that electric vehicles were the future as they localised pollution and were quiet and clean. They would become a significant feature in our future lives. It was important for the Council to be seen to be ahead of the trend and the provision of charging points in town centres would encourage trade and promote the economic viability and vitality of the retail centres.

There were a number of companies that could offer a 'turn-key' solution at no initial cost to the Council (although there were financial implications if it were to be subsequently decided to remove the units). The Council could provide charging points quite quickly at no cost to the Council Tax payer.

Mr Good expressed his thanks to Officers for their support, indicating that the experience that had been gained in Cotswold District had proved to be valuable. Since equipment had been installed in that district, technology had advanced rapidly and the model that the Working Group was investigating offered the prospect of providing facilities at no capital cost to the Council and potentially providing an income stream. Whilst such a model had yet to be identified, the Working Party was pursuing such a solution.

Mr Good advised that he had been in discussion with the Board of Cottsway Housing regarding the possibility of including charging points in new housing developments and had also raised the subject with the South East Region of the National Farmers Union as there was a growing interest in electric vehicles from that quarter. Mr Good suggested that, given a little more time, the Working Party would be able to achieve the objectives that it had set.

Mr Saul expressed his surprise at the limited number of charging points within the District and considered that it would be a positive reflection on the Council if it were to take the lead in providing such facilities.

Mr Emery suggested that it was a little ambitious for the Working Party to complete its work by the next meeting and suggested that it should aim to submit a final report to the October meeting.

RESOLVED: That the progress made by the Working Party be noted.

12. TREASURY MANAGEMENT ACTIVITY AND PERFORMANCE – 2016/2017

The Committee received and considered the report of the GO Shared Service Head of Finance giving details of the performance of in-house and external fund managers for 2016/2017.

In presenting the report, Mr Alway advised Members that the total gain in the value of pooled funds in the table on page 4 of the report should be £733,936 not £768,334 as stated and that the Council's outstanding liability in relation to its Icelandic investments shown in the final paragraph of page 5 was £23,000.

Mr Postan noted that pooled funds had performed well giving a good return but asked if it would be possible to provide a comparison with performance achieved by other fund managers. Officers undertook to explore the possibility with the Council's treasury management advisors.

In response to a question from Mr Good, Mr Sherbourne advised that the Council's investments with housing associations were in the form of two investment bonds and a further fixed term loan.

RESOLVED: That treasury management and the performance of in-house and external Pooled Funds' activity for 2016/2017 be noted.

13. PERFORMANCE INDICATORS – YEAR END 2016/2017

The Committee received and considered the report of the Head of Leisure and Communities providing information on the Council's performance at the end of the fourth quarter of year 2016/2017.

In presenting the report, the Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service explained that a variety of factors had contributed towards the failure to meet the target in relation to answering telephone calls. Difficulties with the waste collection contract, elections and the introduction of the chargeable garden waste service had all brought additional pressure to bear upon the customer services team. Whilst additional resources had been employed, the difficulties experienced had been exacerbated by staff sickness and vacancies.

It was recognised that there was a need to increase staffing levels in advance of the introduction of the new waste collection contract and steps were being taken to recruit additional employees.

Mr Cottrell-Dormer advised that the Government Gateway made much more extensive use of interactive automated facilities than the Council's telephone system. The Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service acknowledged that this was the case and explained that, historically, Members had objected to the use of an automated system, preferring customers to be able to contact a real person.

Mr Postan expressed some concern that the Council was at risk if certain key members of staff became ill or were otherwise unavailable and questioned whether arrangements were in place for succession planning. In response, the Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service acknowledged the importance of ensuring that key roles could continue to be covered in the event of unexpected absences and advised that the shared service arrangements offered a greater degree of resilience than had been available in the past.

Mr Good thanked Officers for acknowledging the problem and indicated that efforts should be made to ensure that staffing levels reflected periods of peak demand. The Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service confirmed that working patterns were designed, so far as possible, to respond to peak workloads.

Mr Howard enquired why, when he had asked to speak to a particular Officer, customer services staff enquired as to the subject of his enquiry. It was explained that this was probably to ensure that the call was properly logged within the Council's customer relationship management system. Mr Howard also expressed some concern that, when left unanswered, direct calls were routed through reception services rather than within the service in question. The Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service accepted that this could be a routing issue but reiterated that, as previously suggested, Members should contact Mandy Smith in the Management Office who would be able to direct their enquiries to the relevant quarter.

Mr Cotterill noted that customers would be charged for a call as soon as it was connected. In response to questions raised by both him and Mr Howard, the Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service confirmed that in-depth information was available through the call logging system.

With regard to performance indicators in general, Mr Dorward indicated that a simple percentage figure was not sufficient to enable Members to properly assess the scale of any particular issue and requested that future reports should also include volumetric information, particularly where red or amber indicators suggested that there could be an issue.

The Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service agreed that this suggestion had merit and undertook to consider the request further.

RESOLVED: That the information provided be noted.

14. START TIME OF MEETINGS

The committee received the report of the Head of Democratic Services seeking consideration of the start time of meetings for the remainder of the 2017/2018 municipal year.

Mr Mullins indicated that he found a 2:00 start difficult and suggested that the Committee might wish to consider starting future meetings at 4:00pm. Whilst this suggestion found some support amongst Members, the majority view favoured continuing the previous arrangements and it was:-

RESOLVED: That meetings of the committee for 2017/2018 commence at 2.00pm.

15. MEMBERS' QUESTIONS

15.1 Protection of the Council's Assets

Mr Cotterill enquired what arrangements were in place to ensure that the Council's assets were not at risk following the establishment and transfer of staff to the Publica Group.

In response, the Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service advised that, as set out in the report to Cabinet and recommendation to Council in October, 2016, Service Level Agreements/Contracts and asset/legal agreements were being developed based upon

existing service levels which would set out the requirements of the Councils in much the same way as the service agreements that had been in operation with GO Shared Services since 2012 and with Ubico since 2015. The same Officers would be delivering the same services based upon service levels and policies set by the individual partner authorities.

It was anticipated that the bulk of assets would remain the property of the Councils and that Publica would utilise these to help deliver services by, for example, leasing space in the offices.

Mr Cotterill also asked what protection would exist for elected representatives if Publica or an associated company, or an employee caused assets to be lost, lose value or become embezzled.

The Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service advised that protection would be no different than at present. Arguably there would be stronger protection with the contract and insurance arrangements than with either direct employment or with shared employment arrangements.

Publica differed from a traditional private company in that it was a wholly owned local authority company. Effectively, Publica was just a shared employment vehicle for the partners, although the existence of contracts and asset agreements etc. meant that the future position would be clearer than current arrangements.

Publica would take out appropriate indemnity insurance, taking on much of the insurance currently provided to the Council, although some residual risk would stay with the Councils as the contracting body.

In response to a question from Mr Howard, the Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service advised that ownership of the refuse collection fleet would remain with the Council, the vehicles having been purchased through the capital programme and leased to the contractor. Retaining control of assets offered the Authority a greater degree of flexibility.

15.2 Data Protection

Mr Good questioned whether the Council was prepared to meet the additional responsibilities imposed by the General Data Protection Regulation when they came into force in May 2018.

In response, the Strategic Director and Head of Paid Service advised that, whilst further work in relation to the education of both Members and staff would be necessary, significant steps had already been taken to ensure compliance with the new requirements. At its last meeting, the Cabinet had considered and approved a review of the Council's Data Protection Policy designed to mitigate the risks associated with processing and holding personal data.

Whilst it could not afford to be complacent, the Council was already familiar with enhanced data protection requirements through its participation in the Public Service Network.

A presentation had been given to Members of the Audit and General Purposes Committee (the Committee primarily responsible for such matters) giving details of the preventative arrangements in place.

Mr Good enquired whether the Council sought an independent review of its data protection arrangements and it was explained that, not only was there a dedicated member of staff with responsibility for data protection, external assurances were sought from time to time.

Mr Postan suggested that appropriate systems could be purchased 'over the counter' to ensure data security.

The meeting closed at 3:10pm

CHAIRMAN